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Empowering Parents of Autistic Children in China to Become Lay Experts: From Needs Discovery to the Development of the AKT Support System

This research began with a deep insight into the challenges faced by Chinese families of Autistic children. Qualitative studies confirmed that, given the scarcity of professional resources, training parents to become "lay experts" is a feasible and necessary strategy. The research not only revealed positive changes in parents' attitudes and behaviors but also precisely identified the core challenges they face in becoming "effective interventionists": a superficial understanding of skills, difficulty generalizing skills to home settings, and a strong desire for accessible, repeatable learning materials and ongoing feedback.

To systematically address these challenges, we initiated several years of method development and empirical research, ultimately developing the Adult Key-behavior for Trait-specific Barriers Intervention (AKT). The emergence of AKT originated from a fundamental paradigm shift: shifting the focus of intervention from attempting to "correct the child" to systematically "remodeling the parent," and from therapist-led intervention to parent self-transformation facilitated by parent-friendly learning.

Based on Lag Sequential Analysis (LSA) and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) of parent-child interaction data from 80 Chinese families, 30 adult key behaviors with "leverage effects" were identified. During the systematic validation phase spanning 2019 to 2024, the research covered 13 regions across three provinces in eastern China. The effectiveness of AKT has been demonstrated and validated across 26 rehabilitation and educational institutions involving over 500 families.

AKT provides parents with a complete theoretical framework (the "Four Doors of Communication" Trait-specific Barriers Model), clear action guidelines (the "Nine Key Behavior Clusters"), and a personalized navigation system (the "5-4-9" Assessment System), aiming to empower parents to become "active constructors" of their child's communication environment.

This presentation will systematically elaborate how a research program evolved from identifying practical problems and needs (empirical research) to constructing theory and methods, undergoing large-scale practical validation and technological integration, ultimately forming a comprehensive solution to systematically support parents of Autistic children in fulfilling the role of "lay experts." This evolutionary pathway provides China-practice-based evidence and a model for family support under similar circumstances globally.

Keywords: Autism; Lay Expert; Parent Empowerment; AKT; Adult Key-behavior for Trait-specific Barriers Intervention; Family Support; Autistic Children

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Biography

Xiaoyan Li, Ph.D., is a Professor at the College of Education, Wenzhou University, and serves as the Director of the Center for Rehabilitation and Education of Children with Autism. Her research focuses on evidence-based interventions for autism spectrum disorder (ASD), particularly integrating brain-computer interface (BCI) technologies with parent-implemented, family-supported neurodevelopmental training. She has led two National Social Science Fund projects and one Project of the National Office for Education Sciences Planning, publishing papers in leading SSCI-indexed journals, including Autism Research and the Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders. She also serves as a Board Member of the International Developmental Disabilities Support Association.